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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Project Creating Opportunities for Navigating and Easing through College Transition (CONNECT), a program implemented by Sam Houston State University, Texas, to assist low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities to realize the possibilities of higher education. Results of an evaluation of Project CONNECT are also reported. Project CONNECT aims to have a minimum of 50% of participants persist to completion of the academic programs in which they are enrolled and at least two-thirds are expected to meet academic performance standards to stay in good standing. Project CONNECT targets students as they enter the institution and ensures that students have access to cultural events, faculty advisers, peer mentors, and other services they may need. In its first year, Project CONNECT has been very successful. A total of 150 students were full time participants, 50 each at 2 participating junior colleges and 50 at Sam Houston State University. The Project experienced a 14% graduation rate in its first year of operation, and 98% of participants were persisting toward completion of a degree. An appendix contains a summary of evaluation findings. (Contains 1 table and 10 references.) (SLD)

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Project CONNECT: A University's Effort to Close the Gaps

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PROJECT CONNECT: A UNIVERSITY'S EFFORT TO CLOSE THE GAPS

The Constitution of the United States urges us all to believe that social mobility, equal access to education, and a job for everyone is the cornerstone upon which our nation was built. In actuality, however, our American society is indeed stratified. Young people living at or below poverty level do not receive the same academic or vocational training as do people within higher socioeconomic groups (Henriksen, 2000). In addition, underrepresented groups are often kept from achieving the educational goals they seek (Crowson, Phillips, & Thielemann, 2002).

Currently, a large gap exists among racial/ ethnic groups in both enrollment and graduation from the state's colleges and universities. Groups with the lowest enrollment and graduation rates will constitute a larger proportion of the Texas population by the year 2030 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [THECB], 2000). Thus, if this gap is not closed, Texas will have proportionately fewer college graduates.

Diverse Students, Diverse Needs

The state of Texas is experiencing dramatic demographic changes. Currently, the state's demographics break down in the following manner: approximately 57% of the population is white, 29% is Hispanic, and 12% is African-American. The projected demographics for 2030 show the Hispanic community comprising 46% of the Texas population, Anglos 36%, and African-Americans 10%. In recognition of these changes, the THECB has taken bold steps to ensure the future success of the students served by Texas public education.

When considering structural barriers established in the system of higher education, a large number of studies focus on minority students' limited access to higher education. Henriksen (2000) wrote that the notion of "equal opportunity" in education is equated to the idea of "unlimited access to some form of college" (p.1). She warned, however, that some students may lack the academic ability to pursue the intellectual paths of their choice. In this case, an important role in helping students achieve realistic academic and occupational ends is to assist those students who are the first generation in their family to attempt higher education (Henriksen, 2000). This, in turn, will help to close the gaps in higher education.

First generation college students are typically non-white and come from families with low incomes. They often did not do well in high school and have few goals concerning higher education. These factors provide a foundation for the gap that exists between the number of students who participate in higher education and/or attain advanced degrees and those who do not. The diverse needs of students must be addressed in order for educators to assist them in attaining their educational goals.

First generation college students are influenced by a variety of distinct factors when making educational and career-related decisions. In the case of many of these students, particularly minority students, family and academic support factors played a significant role in enhancing academic achievement and success (Szelenyi, 2001). Slight differences exist between the educational choices made by minority and non-minority students. Minority students report the following factors as important reasons for college attendance: (1) parental influence, (2) inability to find a job, (3) desire to gain a general education, (4) desire to improve reading and study skills, (5) desire to become more

cultured, and (6) desire to learn things that interest them. White and minority students placed similar emphasis on getting a better job and making more money as reasons for attending community college (Laanan, 1995). Keeping these factors in mind, recruiting strategies need to be revised to accommodate diversity.

Research also indicates that a close association exists between students' cultural background and their preferred learning style. Students' individual learning preferences are typically accompanied by culturally determined tools that influence the way they process information and, depending on the fit between teaching and learning styles, facilitate or hinder their educational achievement (Sanchez, 2000). According to Sanchez (2000), "In comparison to white students, both Hispanic and Native American students exhibited a high propensity for participation in active, concrete learning experiences, cooperative situations, and elaborate processing" (p. 35). Similarly, African-American students' achievement appears to be positively related to oral experiences and interpersonal relationship (Palma-Rivas, 2000). Therefore, teachers should structure their instructional activities with consideration to the diverse preferences represented in their classrooms.

Minority Retention/ Graduation

Like society as a whole, the American college campus is experiencing an expansion of racial and ethnic diversity. As a result of their geographic accessibility, open-doors admissions policies, and reduced costs, community colleges are especially likely to serve a diverse student body (Crowson, Phillips, & Thielemann, 2002). Currently, ethnic minorities comprise approximately 30 percent of student enrollments at

American community colleges (Szelenyi, 2001). However, Texas is well below the national average for minority participation (THECB, 2000).

As the student population of colleges continues to diversify, the educational attainment and retention of ethnic minority students remain problematic (Sanchez, 2001). A general trend throughout higher education reflects that minority students tend to have lower persistence and graduation rates, as well as lower levels of academic preparedness and achievement, compared to their white counterparts (Jalomo, 2001). This national failure undermines the foundations of a free society, interferes with efforts to build a competitive workforce, and raises doubts about our educational system's capacity to respond to present and oncoming demographic changes (Crowson, Phillips, & Thielemann, 2002).

Higher education is engaged in a variety of efforts to facilitate the retention and educational achievement of ethnic minority students. In Texas, the initiative is called *Closing the Gaps*. Successful efforts such as this, whether institution-wide or in the individual classroom, place a strong emphasis on consciously building upon the diverse needs of the student population and facilitating the integration of ethnic minority students into the educational environment. An examination of the effectiveness of these efforts indicate a positive contribution to retaining ethnic minority students (Szelenyi, 2001).

Future efforts must not only focus on the influence race and ethnicity poses on access to education, but also on practical solutions to achieving more equitable access and on creating enriching experiences for all college students. The goals of the *Closing the Gaps* initiative focus on increasing the participation of students in higher education

and increasing the number of degrees and certificates being awarded by Texas colleges and universities.

A Description of Project CONNECT

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2002) developed its plan, *Closing the Gaps by 2015*, "to ensure an educated population and workforce for the future" (p. A-2). This plan was developed to address a need for critical attention to excellence in Texas higher education. The plan addressed four major challenges, each with specific goals, strategies, and target benchmarks for measuring success. The goals for *Closing the Gaps* include:

(1) Participation - to add 500,000 more students to higher education across the state by 2015

(2) Success – to increase by 50 percent the number of degrees, certificates, and other identifiable student successes from high quality programs in Texas institutions of higher learning

(3) Excellence – to substantially increase the number of nationally recognized college and/or university programs and services available to students in Texas

(4) Research – to increase federal science and engineering research by 50 percent to $1.3 billion

In addition to these goals and targets set forth by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, the 77th Texas Legislature also took a number of significant legislative actions to support *Closing the Gaps*. For each of the four goals listed above, the Texas Legislature developed specific strategies for the State of Texas to help meet these goals; each strategy named by the Legislature.

Objectives and Purpose

Project CONNECT (Creating Opportunities for Navigating and Easing through College Transitions) is a program implemented by Sam Houston State University to assist low income, first generation college students and students with disabilities realize the possibilities and opportunities of higher education. Project CONNECT operates under the following five major objectives:

1. A minimum of 50% of the participants will persist toward the completion of the academic programs in which they were enrolled.
2. At least two-thirds of the participants will meet academic performance levels required to stay in good academic standing at their institution of higher learning.
3. At least one-third of participants will graduate each academic year.
4. At least 40% of the community college student participants will transfer each year to a four year institution.
5. Retention, transfer, and graduation rates will increase for all student groups served in the Project – low income students, first generation college students, and students with disabilities.

An additional goal of this project is to facilitate a more supportive climate of institutions for these students and assist students who would like to pursue a career in education.

The nation's poverty rate according to the United States Census Bureau's three year average from 1996 – 1998 is 13.3%. This same rate of poverty for Texas is 16.7%. Texas is second only to California in the highest percentage of poverty for its population.

The counties served by Project CONNECT have an even higher poverty rate. School districts within this service area have student populations of up to 90% economically disadvantaged. Thus, the service area for Project CONNECT offers a population in great need of assistance with closing the gaps.

Higher education has always been a challenge for first generation students. These students also often are unaware of available financial assistance or of career opportunities in various fields. Many of these students do not know what questions to ask nor whom they should even ask; they rarely know what types of assistance centers are available on campus, nor do faculty know how to effectively mentor these students. Project CONNECT addresses that challenge by increasing student retention, transfer, and graduation rates through added student support services. As a result, Project CONNECT is making significant strides for Sam Houston State University to help close the gaps.

Methods, Techniques, and Modes of Inquiry

The first method implemented in this project is the targeting and seeking out of these students as they enter the university or community college so that services can be provided. Learning assistance centers at each higher education institution provide tutorials and study skills programs to improve students' grades. Personal and peer counseling are provided through the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling and the Counseling Center at Sam Houston State University. For students who do not pass the TASP test, developmental programs in math, reading, and writing would be offered to help students prepare for taking and passing the TASP. (The TASP, or Texas Academic Skills Program, is a test students must pass in Texas before being allowed to enroll in college or university coursework; students are tested in reading,

writing, and mathematics. Those students who do not pass must enroll in developmental non-credit courses until they do pass the TASP.)

In addition, cultural events at the university (theater, art, festivals, etc.) are used to help students expand their awareness of these areas as well as to make them feel involved with the university environment. The Career Counseling Center at the community college and the university is used to assist students, particularly in relationship to careers and post-graduate studies and financial assistance for such studies. This Center is also used to assist students transitioning from two year colleges to Sam Houston State University; furthermore, this Center offers financial assistance planning and career counseling for selecting majors.

An undergraduate advisor is positioned at each college in the program. The honors program at Sam Houston State University provides peer mentors for students in Project CONNECT; faculty advisors and mentors are also provided for students. All mentors are trained in effective mentoring techniques. Roving internships at the community college level allow students to create an awareness of their need to continue their education for their area of interest. Financial assistance in the form of supplemental Pell grants has been offered to eligible participants at the community college level.

Assessment of needs of Project CONNECT participants are based on referral reports from various agencies, self report instruments, interviews, review of TASP scores, ACT scores, SAT scores, English proficiency tests, and a review of GPAs from high school or community colleges. Academic progress is monitored through the Community College Liaison (CCL) and the SHSU Project Director (SPD). Students check in with the CCL and SPD once a month online and every three months in person.

Students also have a faculty or student peer mentor who monitor and assist the student. Table 1 demonstrates the student population served in Project CONNECT's first year.

Table 1. Students served in Project CONNECT, Year 1

Institution	Low Income First Generation	Disabled	Low Income Disabled	Low Income	First Generation	Campus Total
Sam Houston State University	32	2	0	8	8	50
Montgomery College	33	1	0	7	9	50
Tomball College	31	1	2	8	8	50
Total	96	4	2	23	25	150

Results and Conclusions

In its first year of implementation, Project CONNECT has been very successful. A total of 150 students are full time participants in the program. One hundred of the participants are enrolled at the two participating junior colleges (50 students at each college), and 50 are enrolled at Sam Houston State University. The Project has already experienced a 14% graduation rate – 21 of the 150 participants graduated with their college degree by the end of year one of implementation. Ten of these graduates were from community colleges, and 11 graduated from Sam Houston State University with their bachelor's degree. Even more impressive at the end of the first year is Project CONNECT's persistence rate: 98% of the students involved in Project CONNECT who did not graduate the first year are persisting toward the completion of their college degree. The transfer rate for participants from community college to a four-year university was 16% (16 of the 100 community college students in Project CONNECT are

transferring to a university for the upcoming school year). The evaluation data for Project CONNECT, Year 1, appear in Appendix A.

The following activities were implemented to accomplish the Project CONNECT's objectives:

- Tutoring services for TASP subject areas. Students were first referred to the schools tutoring centers. If students felt they needed additional tutoring, sessions were scheduled and students were taught on an individual basis.
- Mentoring services and facilitation of transfer for participants planning to transfer to the University such as: advising, delivering financial aid and registration packets, and finding government housing and employment opportunities.
- An on-line editing service. First generation students often have no one to peruse their papers before submitting them. Students at SHSU also have the option of submitting a hard copy.
- Establishment of a lending library. Participants were able to borrow essential texts and other supplies needed to succeed with their assignments.
- Invitation and purchase of tickets for eligible participants to two cultural events. Families and friends of participants were able to purchase their tickets at a discounted rate.
- All community college students received information regarding Saturdays at Sam, an SHSU orientation program, and were notified of the event in a timely manner.
- Sixty community college students received grant aid.

Additional services were also added at the conclusion of Project CONNECT's first year.

Closing the Gaps through Project CONNECT

Project CONNECT assists low income, first generation college students and students with disabilities in realizing the possibilities and opportunities of higher education. Additionally, the program increases student retention and graduation rates and transfer rates for such students to four year institutions. One of the main goals of Sam Houston State University, and of many institutions of higher learning, is to increase retention rates among college student populations. Project CONNECT not only increases this retention rate, but it also facilitates a more supportive climate of institutions for these students. Furthermore, it particularly assists those students who would like to pursue a career in education. The collaborative effort between this university and two area community colleges assists the aforementioned students with the overwhelming amount of information involved with attending higher education, including the steps necessary to continue their education and strategies to complete their goals.

College can be a time of tremendous stress as students, particularly those who also manage households and families, work, and in their spare time, study. Over 50% of the student population at Sam Houston State University commutes to school and works part time or full time in addition to taking classes, the burden is heavier for making good grades while juggling work, family, and school. For students who are not traditional, middle level socio-economic status, there are socio-cultural challenges to encounter as well. With the legislature's challenge to close the gaps by 2015, Project CONNECT is working to help make a college degree a realistic and successful experience for students.

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Appendix A

Evaluation of Project CONNECT, Year 1

Objective 1:

- Project CONNECT will identify and serve 150 students per year by working with 50 students at SHSU, 50 students at Montgomery College, and 50 students at Tomball College.

Objective 1 was met by identifying and serving the following groups of eligible participants at the three institutions:

96	Low-income and first generation participants
4	Disabled participants
2	Low-income and disabled participants
23	Low-income participants
25	First-generation participants
150	Total participants identified and served

Graduation
Objective 2:
One-third of eligible participants (50) will graduate from either a two-year or four year institution each year.

Many participants eligible for the program were not eligible to graduate due to their entry grade level. The following numbers of participants graduated:

16	Associate's Degree
13	Batchelor's Degree
29	Total number of participants graduating

Persistence
Objective 3:
Fifty percent of eligible participants (75) will persist toward completion of the academic programs in which they were enrolled.

The project had a 93% persistence rate. Students persisting toward their academic goals numbered 139 with only 11 students dropping out of college and one of those called and said that she is registered for the spring semester. Another is taking a year off due to personal reasons but hopes to return.

Transfer
Objective 4:

Forty percent of eligible participants graduating from a two-year college (20) will transfer each year from a community college to a four-year institution.

Of the 16 students that received an Associate's Degree, 11 students and 69% transferred. In all, eighteen students and 18% transferred from the community colleges to a four-year institution. Receiving colleges included: Sam Houston State University, University of Houston, Pan American University, Prairie View A&M, Texas Women's University, and the University of St. Thomas.

Good Academic Standing
Objective 5:
Two thirds of eligible participants (100) will maintain required grades to stay in good academic standing.

Ninety-five percent and 143 students remained in good academic standing at the end of the program year. Seven students were on academic probation.

Administrative Functions
Objective 6:
All administrative functions will be conducted in compliance to grant specifications.

All administrative functions have adhered to grant specifications. The program officer was routinely consulted for compliance issues.

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